

2nd Sunday Before Lent

St Mary Abbots

Genesis 2:4b-9, 15-end, Revelation 4 & Luke 8:22-25

Mother Emma

“The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.” In the very beginning, before Creation itself, there was only God, the darkness, the Spirit (sometimes translated as “wind or breath”) and water.

Our lovely recent break on the Suffolk coast ended with a rare experience in modern times, when the whole of the town we were staying in suffered a complete power cut for several hours. Hearing the sound of the invisible dramatic waves breaking in the complete darkness and cold, perhaps gave us a tiny insight into these scenes of the world *before* God’s creative power moved over the water and created a work of beauty and inspiration which God himself could declare was “very good”.

The Second Sunday before Lent is, as you may have guessed from our readings(!), sometimes known as Creation Sunday. Before we enter the solemn penitence of the season, the liturgy seeks to re-open our eyes to all the beauty and richness of God’s Creation, so freely given to the human race, yet so often marred and wasted by humanity’s sense of entitlement and self-orientation.

Of course, our personal experience of the recent storms was very minimal compared with those in the UK who tragically lost lives or vital possessions; or the terrible losses sustained through flooding and typhoons all across the world in South Africa, Brazil, Colombia and Madagascar just in the last couple of weeks.

As we hold those who have suffered in our prayers, in the knowledge that God is also there, as always, suffering amongst his people, should we be asking ourselves about the effect of our own lives and actions on God’s world?

I once went to an immensely powerful and poignant reflection on the story of Creation, which we just heard in full. The presentation drew on the teaching method entitled Godly Play, originally developed for children out of the Montessori tradition, used here by Martina to great effect for children, but also very powerful for making stories come visually alive for adults as well.

The speaker laid out an enormous blue cloth to symbolise “the face of the waters”, all that existed before God’s creative work began. She then began slowly to attach onto the blue, the shape of the continents, cut out in pale green felt, as the dry land gradually appeared from the deep. Around the cloth she laid tiny fairy lights, symbolising the sun, moon and stars, and then slowly and reflectively added tiny green plants and flowers, models of fish, birds and animals, and finally, tiny human beings. The overall effect was tremendously beautiful, and the speaker declared:

“God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.”

So far, so familiar. However, unlike the version we just heard, the story did not end there with God resting on the seventh day. The speaker continued with features which had become part of the Creation, following the arrival – and the fall - of Adam and Eve. She added small buildings, and tiny red threads to indicate the spread of disease; and gradually, the buildings placed on the continents became bigger and more tightly packed; as little vehicles also entered the picture. Patches of sticky black appeared on both land and sea, and finally, she laid over the whole thing, layers and layers of grey, untreated sheep’s wool, thinly at first, so that the buildings and outlines could still be seen, and then more and more heavily until almost everything had been obscured, leaving us to form our own interpretation as to whether this might

represent pollution, seen from above or our separation from God's creative intention. She finished with the words,

"And God saw everything that he had made, and it was....." and there was a long silence.

It left us all speechless, as we reflected on our personal and communal stewardship of God's creation, and of our responsibility for the miraculous life and beauty entrusted to our care.

Medieval theologians often referred to the "eighth day of Creation" as the new, recreated life after the Resurrection, in which **we** all live, but the Godly Play presentation suggested a much more worrying "eighth day" of Creation, a day in which God's creatures slowly obscured the signs of his creative power in the world around them. This whole idea raises so many issues – from physical and practical questions about climate change and the unfair distribution of the world's resources - to uncomfortable self-interrogation about the extent to which we wander metaphorically in a thick grey fog of our own making, so tied up with our own concerns that we are no longer filled with joy and gratitude at the beauty of God's creation round about us.

Since 2014, in the US, Creation Sunday has been appointed "Climate Change Sunday". Preachers are asked to publish and share their sermons online, and to encourage their congregations to join campaigns or make personal pledges to work for better stewardship of God's world. As we hear again today the story of Creation, we can appreciate the beauty, the intricacy, the splendour and the abundance of what we see in Nature around us, not as resources to be seized and amassed, but as generous provision by God for the needs of the whole world.

It is easy for the Church to appear to be "jumping on the bandwagon" of green issues, or of simple, minimalist lifestyles. In fact, although there have been many examples of greed and excess within the history of the Church, there have also been many touching examples of those who lived simply and lightly on the earth, amongst them the ever-popular St Francis, centring their love on God and his creatures, and sharing what they had with others.

As we prepare ourselves for Lent this year, perhaps we may once again remember the abundant generosity and care of God in creation, and, giving thanks for each of our blessings, seek ourselves to be more generous and less demanding in our use of God's gifts.